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Jessica Bolton

Sr. Mary Janet: Work and Play as a Hospital Chaplain

Abstract: In December 2017, I interviewed Sr. Mary Janet, a Franciscan sister who works as a hospital chaplain. This paper includes a portion of my interview with her and her opinions on how chaplaincy has strengthened her faith and ties with her local community.

While resting in a cozy convent room on reclining chairs, I interviewed Sr. Mary Janet, a Franciscan sister, in order to determine how her life as a religious sister has affected her work career and vice versa. She chose to be a sister years after having a prosperous and established career with an industrial company, and has since transitioned from her older, monetarily affluent life to a life modeled after the sacrifice and service of St. Francis of Assisi.

Sr. Mary Janet has a master's degree in counseling and has worked in a variety of places since becoming a religious sister. She worked full-time at a parochial school before entering her current job as the chaplain at the local children's hospital. She finds immense fulfillment in her work, and because her job does not have strict parameters, she mostly asks whomever, patient or staff, the question: "What do you need me for?" A chaplain, though part of the hospital community, resides on the outskirts of the immediate hospital personnel, but Sr. Mary Janet weaves in and around the community to help tie it together. "Sometimes I come in there just to make them laugh," she told me, and mischievously recalled bringing in (regular) brownies the day after her colleagues joked about how easy it would be to theoretically bring pot brownies in to work.

Sr. Mary Janet works at a Catholic hospital, so her feelings about being on the outskirts of the community intrigued me. She has a definite place in the hospital, which still holds onto its

religious history, but the contemporary trends are toward scientific success and drawing a broader, not Catholic-specific audience. Sr. Mary Janet operates as a chaplain despite these modern practices, and through her prayers, guidance, service, and serving of (regular) brownies, she operates as a living reminder of the hospital's Catholic history. One of her favorite things to witness is the perseverance of families and children through the difficult times at the hospital, and then observing how everyone changes and grows when the treatments are over. She has to be present with the patients, families, and staff through the entire process. "Everybody prays," she said, regardless of the secular tendencies of the modern hospital. And, "by osmosis sometimes," she watched faith grow in those people as she offered them her own faith. "My job has strengthened my faith," she expressed thoughtfully; and, after a minute, added wryly: "and my faith in the human race."

Diverse crowds are drawn to the area because of this large-scale, modern, and profitable hospitable. There are many opportunities for healthcare providers and patients alike, from extensive medical education programs to specialized treatment options. Diverse people bring diverse cultures and religions, and Sr. Mary Janet has to navigate her way through that sensitive arena. "We're human beings and we are different," she voiced, and her job as chaplain is to respect those differences and offer what she can. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses will not receive blood transfusions, so she needs to help medical personnel understand that tradition and change treatment plans if necessary. Each religion has different death and burial traditions, so she must inform the hospital if a body needs to be taken and buried within a certain number of days, or if embalming is permitted or not. She also accommodates prayers for different religions: if patients ask for a specific minister, she will try to bring that minister in for them. She also needs to respect prayer traditions and gender roles that she never had to think about in

her own Catholic tradition. “I’ve learned to pray in different ways,” she told me, which has profoundly affected her own faith.

Sr. Mary Janet and I spoke for over an hour about her life as a religious sister, her careers, the nuances of interfaith work, and her relationship with her community. In every story she shared, an underlying attitude prevailed: the power of laughter and fun. She works at a job where children could live or die, and sometimes the only thing she can do is try to get them to laugh. If she makes her job too somber and serious, she, her patients, the patients’ families, and the staff will all be too downtrodden to allow any healing to take place. She has worked with children for her whole religious career, and when she brings in fun, little girls struggling with bullies in third grade parochial school and sixth graders facing stage 3 bone cancer in a hospital bed alike can laugh at her (regular) brownie and nuns-driving-sports-cars stories, regardless of their adversaries and illnesses.

Works Cited

“Sr. Mary Janet.” In person interview by author. December 27, 2017.